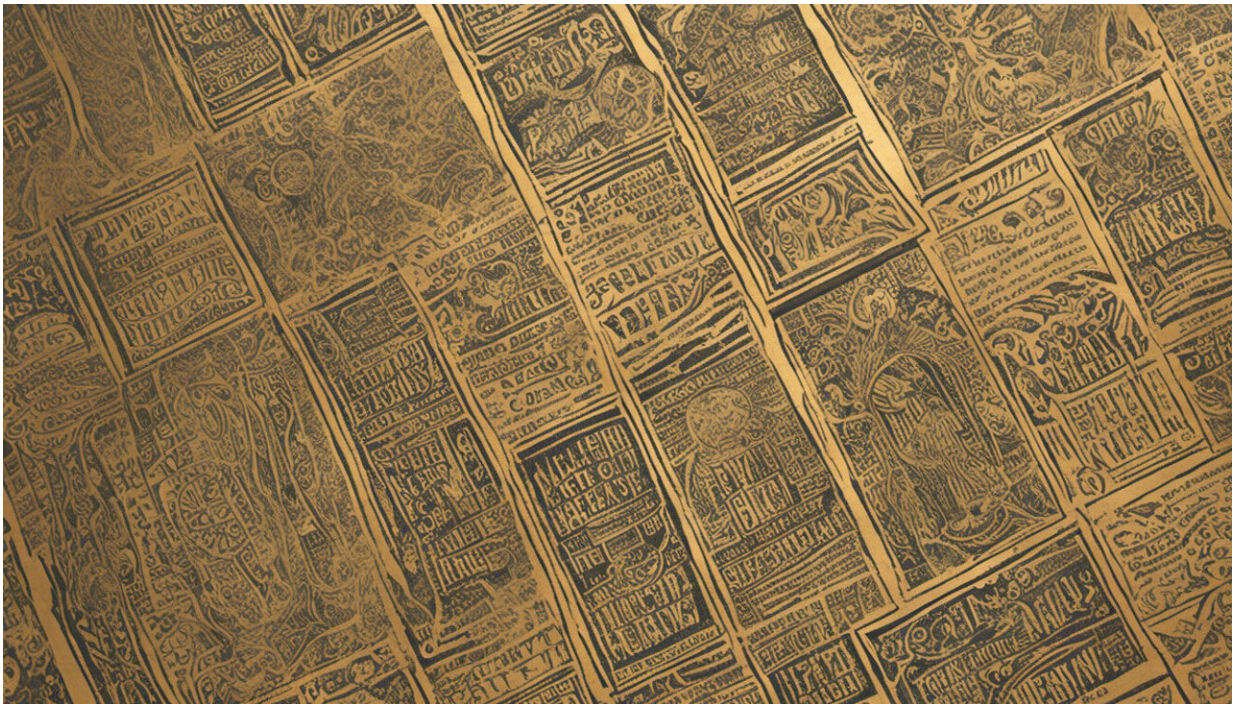


Study finds religious program advertising appeals mainly to fear

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Christians and fundamentalists are a major section of American society, with influence in political, social and economic circles. Yet, little is known about how advertisers work to reach a fundamentalist population. A study from the University of Kansas analyzed advertising content from religious programs and found that fear is the primary appeal used

to reach Christian viewers and medical products are among the most commonly advertised.

The findings will help media researchers better understand a major section of the populace and could lend themselves to advertisers improving their efficiency in reaching their target audience, said Tien-Tsung Lee, professor of journalism at KU and one of the study's authors.

Researchers analyzed 205 television commercials aired during 10 episodes each of "The 700 Club" and "CBN Newswatch," both of which air on the Christian Broadcast Network; and "Christian World News," which the reviewers watched and analyzed online. They found fear was the most commonly used appeal, with nearly 50 percent of the ads doing so. Health, 38 percent; death, about 33 percent, and isolation, nearly 28 percent, followed. Appeals to religion were the fifth most common, at nearly 26 percent. Many of the ads overlapped, using more than one appeal, and loss, pain, safety and rejection were also noted appeals.

Among advertised products, religious books and DVDs were not surprisingly at the top. Medical supplies, cancer treatments, dental insurance and cosmetic surgery were the most common health products, while gold, pre-paid cell phone plans and home security systems were common non-health products.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Media and Religion*, was the product of a graduate seminar focusing on popular culture and mass media. Lee co-authored the paper with KU graduate students Stephen Gray, Alexandra English and Tejinder Singh Sodhi.

"Christian fundamentalists are a pretty major political force that the graduate students wanted to understand better," Lee said. "We had some good discussions about what they saw in the ads, and I asked them a lot about what they meant by fear. They found there was a lot of appeal to

fear and thinking the world is going to harm (the audience) and that it's better to protect yourself."

The findings of fear-based appeals reflect research into Christian fundamentalists' mentality from the fields of psychology and political science that show caution, distrust of outsiders and a sense that their belief system is threatened, the researchers wrote.

When compared with advertising content from other programs, those from religious programs tended to have less for general products such as food and drink, and focused more on religious appeals than their secular counterparts. That reflects the core mission of advertising to solve problems for certain populations, and the observed products and appeals aimed to do that, Lee said. If compared with the evening news on major networks, the audiences are similar in that they are largely older individuals.

"Another explanation is the viewers tend to be older," Lee said. "As you get older, your health conditions tend to decline, and there is more interest in health products that don't necessarily have anything to do with a religious background."

However, the fear-based appeals for products such as [home security systems](#) and those encouraging viewers to buy gold to protect themselves from economic crashes clearly played to the mindset of changing society, even if they didn't have overtly religious overtones. Such advertisements appearing on religious programming could also be a matter of economics.

"Certain products and brands have a very small advertising budget but do still want to advertise," Lee said. "So they look around for cheaper options, and cable and local stations are cheaper than major networks. And they're looking for people who buy inexpensive products, and these

three programs may make sense for them."

While the study helps increase understanding of advertising to Christian audiences for media scholars, it did not examine the contents of the programs themselves. Lee said he hopes to study the programs closer, as the majority of studies to look at the programming were conducted in the 1980s and '90s. There has been little study of appeals the programs themselves use, if they have become more or less political and how they reach viewers.

The findings of the current study help shed light on a major section of the U.S. populace and can help improve understanding for advertisers, political campaign managers and communications scholars looking to reach and understand Christian audiences.

Provided by University of Kansas

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